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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

The New Politics: Panama Style

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**26 June 1970
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After twenty months in power, General Omar Torrijos' Provisional Junta Government is beginning to bring its policy goals into focus. Torrijos apparently knows the direction in which he wants to go, but he has not yet mapped out the route or found a way to attain his contradictory objectives. Desiring to make fundamental changes in Panamanian politics, the government has dissolved all political parties and is determined to prevent a return of the traditional oligarchy-dominated political system. Although the government had promised elections in 1970, it has made no plans as yet and shows no inclination to relinquish power within the foreseeable future.

The regime has also demonstrated its concern for economic development and economic reform. It has attempted to a far greater extent than past governments to assist the poor, the middle class, and the labor unions. At the same time it has tried to attract foreign capital and to stimulate domestic private investment. To this end, despite its sometimes revolutionary rhetoric, the government has moved cautiously and has avoided a frontal attack on the economic position of the oligarchy. A basic distrust between local business community and the government remains, nevertheless. The unwillingness of the private sector to raise its level of investment is a serious irritant—one that threatens to bring about increased government intrusion into the economy.

For both political and economic reasons, Torrijos is showing increased interest in reopening canal treaty negotiations, dormant since 1967. The record of previous negotiations has been under close review

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top officials have already expressed irritation over the use of the Canal Zone as a safe haven for political opponents of the regime. They are convinced, moreover, that the country is not receiving sufficient economic benefits from the canal, and the government has indicated its interest in having a number of areas and facilities within the zone returned to Panama.

The New Politics: Panama Style

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*THE END OF AN ERA**The Old System*

From 1903, when Panama gained its independence from Colombia, until the 1968 coup, politics was a game played largely by the oligarchy—a small group of elite families comprising less than two percent of the population. Political parties were temporary and shifting alliances of convenience formed around various political leaders. These personalistic parties generally trumpeted Panamanian nationalism and accepted the notion that the oligarchy's near monopoly of social, economic, and political power should be defended. Political competition between factions of the oligarchy was rooted in the desire to ensure a place at the trough when the political and economic spoils were being distributed.

Until the late 1940s, the National Guard, the country's only military force, had merely supported the oligarchy and rarely entered directly into politics. In 1949, however, it intervened in the wake of fraudulent elections, recounted the ballots, and declared Arnulfo Arias the winner. Two years later the Guard, tired of Arias' authoritarian approach, ousted him. Then, in 1952, the Guard commandant was elected president in a relatively honest election—the first time that a military man had headed the government. Although the Guard had clearly established itself as an independent political force, the oligarchy was able to reassert its traditional control of the political system from 1956 to 1968.

Given the very extensive patronage at the disposal of the chief executive, it was not surprising that presidential elections were hotly contested affairs and often marked by some degree of electoral fraud. The 1968 election, however, was one of the most vicious in Panamanian history. President Robles, sparing no effort to impose a successor, sought and gained the support of the National Guard for his choice. Nevertheless, the opposition candidate, Arnulfo Arias, piled up so large a vote that the Guard, fearing a dishonest

ballot count would lead to violence, shifted its support and allowed Arias to win.

Challenge and Response

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A consummate politician who had endeared himself to the masses, Arias excelled as a candidate.

He had been president twice before, but each time had been kicked out of office. Approaching his third term and upset by the blatantly political role of the Guard, Arias appeared determined to strip the military of its political power.

Only ten days after his inauguration, Arias again found himself unemployed, and Panama was treated to its first direct military dictatorship.

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The October 1968 coup was simply an action by the Guard in defense of its interests. Officers whose positions were threatened ensured their own job security in the most direct way possible. Once in power, however, they found it necessary to justify their disregard for democratic and constitutional procedures.

THE NEW PANAMA

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Rationalization and Reality

It took the publicists nearly a year to settle on the slogan "The New Panama Movement," but almost from the beginning the coup was labeled a revolution. The political power of the oligarchy was declared at an end, and it was alleged that public policy henceforth would benefit all of society. In language reminiscent of other Latin American military politicians, Panama's new leaders pledged themselves to make honesty and efficiency the guiding principles of government, and promised to put an end to corruption and nepotism.

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Despite the rhetoric, the regime's first concern was to neutralize all opposition. Constitutional guarantees were suspended, known leftists were arrested, university autonomy was ignored, and schools were closed. Pro-Arias officers within the Guard were purged, some opposition newspapers and radio stations were taken over, and efforts were organized to root out the small and poorly organized pro-Arias guerrilla movement that had sprung up in the interior. The massive opposition that was expected never materialized, however, and power struggles within the Guard rather than the threat from Arias posed the major danger to stability.

A provisional junta government headed by two figureheads and assisted by a civilian cabinet had been set up, but the locus of power rested with the two principal architects of the coup—colonels Omar Torrijos and Boris Martinez. Although a subordinate, Martinez set about the task of upstaging and undermining Torrijos. He undertook policy initiatives reflecting his strong antagonism toward the oligarchs and politicians and placed his followers in key command positions. Torrijos attempted to avoid a showdown, but by February 1969 Martinez' growing domination of the Guard and the government had reached the point where Torrijos could no longer afford to temporize.

The ouster of Martinez and his principal supporters ended Torrijos' problems for a time, but factionalism within the Guard continued. Matters again came to a head in mid-December when the Deputy Commandant Silvera and Chief of Staff of the Guard Sanjurseized control of the government while Torrijos was in Mexico on a pleasure trip. Their coup was short-lived; Torrijos landed in the interior, rallied his supporters, and returned in triumph to Panama City.

The December coup attempt marked a kind of watershed for Torrijos. Although he had established himself as the dominant political figure after the ouster of Martinez, he apparently had not been comfortable in the role of leader of the

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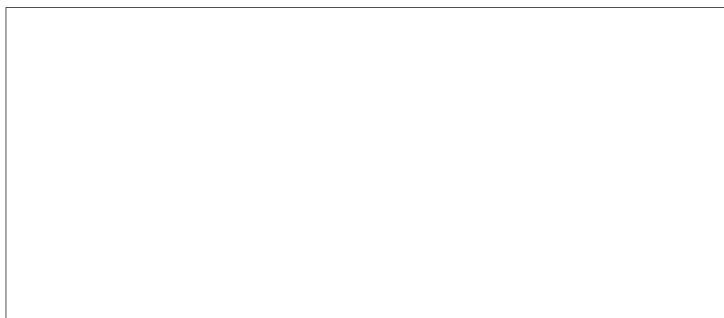
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what is troubling the people, and do something about it. If a roof leaks or a school needs repair, it is noted and the job is done. If a young girl needs money for a dress, Torrijos fishes in his pocket and leaps to the rescue. If a local official has been arbitrary, Torrijos listens to the complaint and rights the wrong.

The fundamental problems are not being touched, of course, and little is really being accomplished. The villagers, however, can point to something concrete. They can see that the government cares about them and they will remember Torrijos. But this too is policy on the run, improvisation rather than planning.

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Domestic Policy Goals



From the beginning, the regime had made a whipping boy of the oligarchy, blaming it for all of Panama's ills. Torrijos separated politics from economics, however, and made no move to interfere seriously with the economic position of the oligarchy. Apparently expecting business as usual despite his antioligarchy pronouncements, he was vexed by the negative reaction of the business community and dismayed that domestic private investment declined.

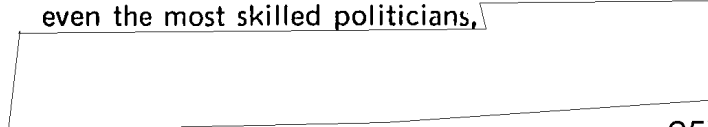
The oligarchy had initially believed that the military interlude would be brief and that, with only a minor change of cast, the show would go on as before. Martinez quickly demonstrated, however, that he would not operate in the corrupt albeit time-honored way. He could not be bought and he would not play ball. Business leaders, although relieved when he was ousted, con-



**NATIONAL GUARD DISTRIBUTING
SHOES TO CHILDREN**

tinued to withhold cooperation in the hope of gaining a larger role in government. The regime's one unalterable article of faith, however, was that the traditional oligarchy-dominated system had to be destroyed. As time went on, it became clear to the business community that Torrijos had no intention of relinquishing power, that general elections would not be held soon, and that whatever elections were held would be carefully controlled.

If the oligarchy was to be frozen out of politics and if power was to rest on more than the guns of the Guard, it was obvious that an alternative political system had to be devised. This, of course, was a task that would tax the resources of even the most skilled politicians.



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Three points became evident, however. In order for power to be institutionalized, an electoral vehicle had to be created. Secondly, if the power of the elite was to be broken, a mass or popular base of support had to be developed. Finally, if mass support was essential, organized

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labor could form the nucleus from which other mass organizations might subsequently be fashioned.

Drawing upon the Mexican model, the government unveiled the New Panama Movement on the first anniversary of the October coup. This was to be a broadly based political organization, organized on a sector basis and including peasant, worker, student, and professional groups. Taking a page from Peron, Torrijos the following month announced plans to establish a government-controlled national labor organization in which the participation of existing unions would be compulsory.



PRESIDENT LAKAS

The reason for Torrijos' forbearance was his continued desire to improve the climate for investment. In mid-1969 the government had been forced to institute an expensive public works program in order to counter a slowdown in the rate of private domestic investment. The regime had believed that the business community would soon accept the new political situation and the economic picture would improve, but the growth of domestic private investment remained at little more than half the 1967 level. Government programs were not scaled down, and the budget deficit increased substantially.

25X6 Despite the government's tactical retreat, these and other pronouncements frightened both the oligarchy and the business community. Certain elements within CONEP, the Panamanian federation of private sector groups, reportedly began to plot against the government, to investigate the possibility of collaboration with the exiled Arias, and to see whether any Guard officers could be persuaded to oust Torrijos. Although most businessmen were unwilling to stick their necks out so long as Torrijos showed some degree of restraint, they resorted to a kind of passive resistance—a slowing of their investment in the economy.

25X6 Considering the gulf that had already developed, Lakas' efforts to build bridges to the business community should not have been expected to bear fruit overnight.

Prolabor statements continued, taxes were increased, and workmen's compensation insurance, previously handled by private companies, was taken over by the government's Social Security Fund.

These last two measures in particular deepened the alienation of the business community. Even though the government toned down the tax measure after Lakas interceded with Torrijos on

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behalf of the business interests, it remained a bitter pill. Reaction against the take-over of workmen's compensation was even stronger. The insurance companies attacked the decree as tantamount to expropriation, and other businessmen became concerned that the government might move against them next.

25X6 Although Torrijos was prepared to advertise these measures as evidence of his commitment to reform, his primary motivation apparently was not reform and certainly not the alienation of the business community.

25X6 Because the government taps the Social Security Fund at will, any additional monies put into it would become immediately available for government programs. The tax measure was more obvious—it promised to yield more than \$10 million in 1970.

With revenue still insufficient to support the politically and economically necessary public works program, the government has had to rely on foreign borrowing to cover budget deficits and upon foreign investment to help keep the economy healthy. Torrijos, therefore, has seemed even more concerned about Panama's standing with the international financial community than about his relations with the local businessmen. This may help to explain the recent removal from the cabi-

net of two prominent leftists, Minister of the Presidency Vasquez and Minister of Labor Escobar. Although Lakas had long sought their ouster, complaining that they were undercutting his efforts to improve relations with the private sector,

These cabinet changes do not appear to foreshadow a shift to the right, however. Both men were appointed to judicial posts. Escobar became president of the Electoral Tribunal and Vasquez was given a seat on the Supreme Court, and there is no evidence that Torrijos has lost confidence in either man or that he will not make use of them in the future. More importantly, Torrijos' enmity toward the business community has not diminished. He is convinced that it is trying to sabotage his efforts to keep the economy moving, and he has reportedly given up hope of winning it over.

Constrained to revalidate his reformist credentials and interested in cutting the oligarchy down a peg or two, Torrijos may be moving to set up cooperatives that would compete directly with oligarchy-owned enterprises. The government has already announced plans to build a \$12-million sugar mill in Veraguas to give cane growers an alternative outlet to the two existing mills controlled by the oligarchy even though such a sugar mill cannot be justified on economic grounds. The regime reportedly is also studying the possibility of building a cement plant and organizing a government-controlled dairy cooperative.

This approach would offer significant advantages. It can help win popular support even if simply presented as part of a development program designed to increase production capacity, improve skills, and provide jobs. It also gives the government a convenient way to put pressure on the business community either to increase the rate of investment or to adhere to a particular policy. Reports relative to this latter possibility indicate that the government might enter into



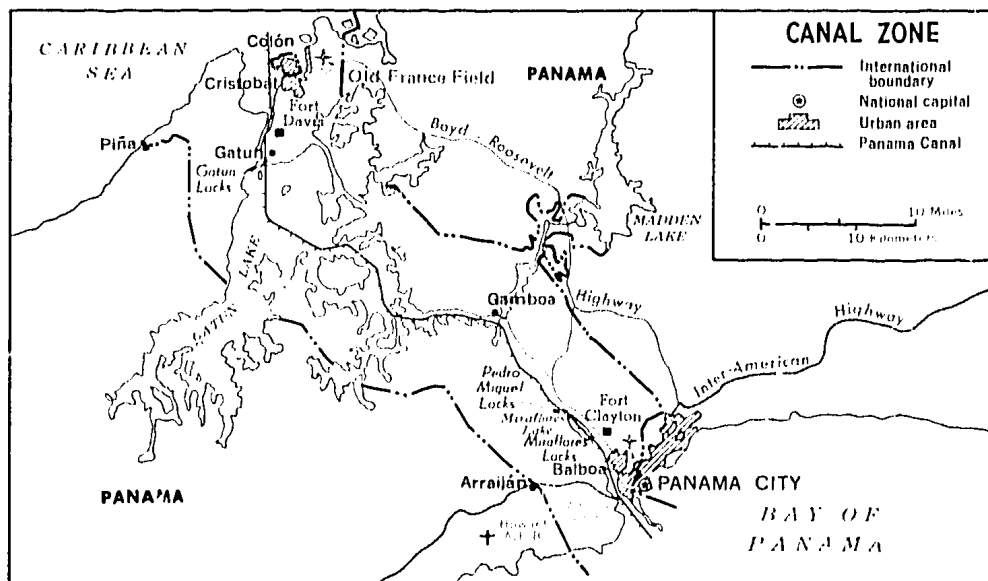
PUBLIC WORKS PROJECT

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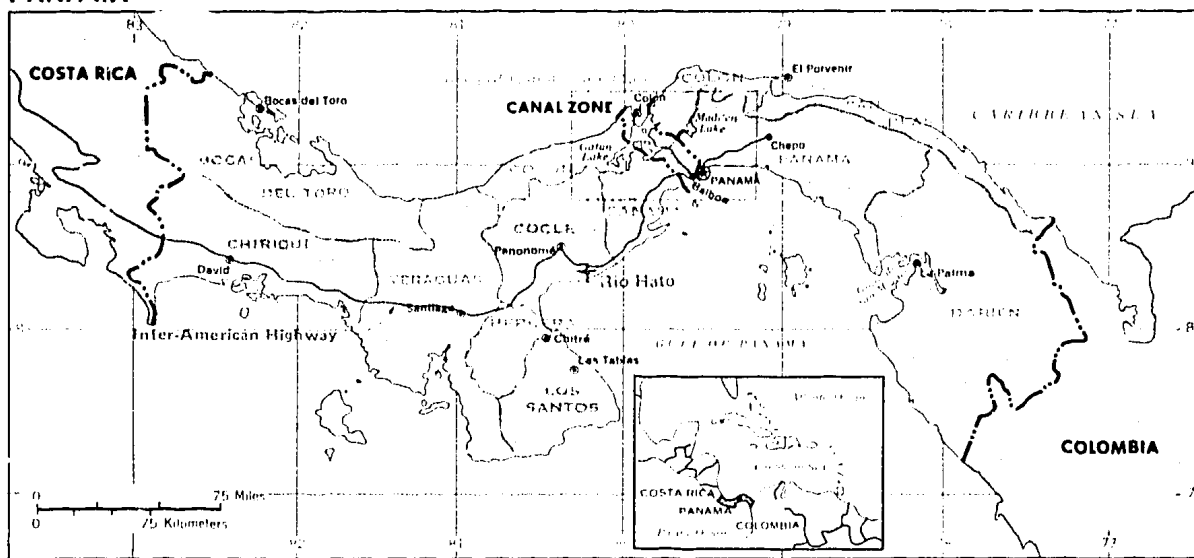
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The Panamanians have also expressed an interest in obtaining concessions in advance of treaty negotiations. They have pressed in particular the return of the Balboa ship repair facilities and Old France Field. The lands and facilities of the France Field area would be used to enlarge the Colon Free Zone, and the Panamanian Planning Director has stated publicly that if this were done annual earnings from the Free Zone would double within the next five years. The Panamanians also want a substantial increase in the sugar quota and additional US assistance for road-building.

They would also provide a much-needed financial cushion.

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The full catalogue of requirements probably has not been formulated and Panamanian thinking on treaty negotiations is still subject to change.

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In January, Torrijos and Lakas told the US ambassador that all commercial activities should be turned over to Panama and that they wanted the Zone to be more closely integrated economically with the rest of the country. Although they recognized US requirements for controlling the operation and defense of the canal, they stressed that Panama must be treated as a full and equal partner. Torrijos noted also that the present situation giving the US rights in perpetuity was unacceptable. He thought, however, that a treaty that had no terminal date would be politically manageable if it provided for periodic consultation and adjustment, and also for a complete review in 20 to 30 years.

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Although Torrijos' tenure cannot be assured, he appears to have a firm grasp on the levers of power. strong or united opposition to the General has not developed within the Guard. As long as he does not absent himself from the country for an extended period of time and his subordinates continue to bicker among themselves, Torrijos stands a good chance of being able to move against his opponents before they can move against him.

The government's most immediate problem has been to scare up enough money to refinance the \$22 million in short-term funds borrowed last year and to find additional credits to cover current expenditures. A \$10-million loan was secured in March, and prospects for obtaining an additional \$30 million now appear to be good.

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Although the government will proceed cautiously, once the liquidity problem subsides, more sustained efforts to undermine the economic power of the oligarchy could develop. In addition, business concern about the high rate of government spending and the possibility of additional taxes is likely to have a continuing dampening effect on domestic private investment. Thus, relations with the business community may get worse before they get better.

Restoration of normal political activity is not yet in sight. The government has publicly committed itself to hold elections this year, presumably for a constituent assembly that would amend the constitution and pave the way for general elections. The lack of any preparations to date suggests slippage in the electoral timetable. Although both the procedures and results of any election would be carefully controlled, Torrijos would have to balance the possible advantages of legitimizing the Provisional Junta Government against the danger of disorders. A final decision may depend on what happens over the next couple of months. Thus far, Torrijos has little to show for his 20 months in power. If he can come up with some dramatic accomplishment—perhaps important concessions from the US—he may decide to push for elections and may re-examine the possibility of organizing the New Panama Movement. If there are setbacks, however, or if problems develop within the Guard, Torrijos will not want to permit any increase in political activity for fear of raising the level of tension.

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emphasis will be on highly visible projects. The government is unlikely to revive plans for a compulsory government-controlled labor federation despite continuing efforts to build labor support. The regime reportedly has told a number of independent banana growers in Chiriqui and Bocas del Toro provinces that they would be arrested if they did not allow their workers to be organized into a union, and similar pressure may be exerted in the future on behalf of union organizers.

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